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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the Westley-MacLean communication model, suggests some important research questions generated by it, and discusses recent research in mass media. A brief review of recent research suggests that the concept of agenda setting may be usefully superimposed on the Westley-MacLean model to reveal partial answers to some of these important questions and to suggest some implications. Some consequents and some determinants of agenda setting have been revealed, while additional investigations are needed. The paper reports an instance which emphasizes both the implications of the agenda-setting concept and the fact that the low priority assigned by media to routine electoral matters will affect the salience of these matters for consumers of media reports. This instance also offers evidence that political news is currently emphasized less by the media than in previous years. (Author/JM)

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The Utility of the Concept of Agenda-Setting and Implications for Political Communication

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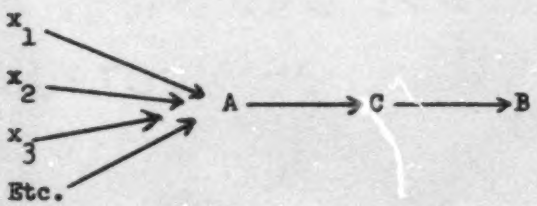
"The Utility of the Concept of Agenda-Setting
and Implications for Political Communication"

Communication researchers recognize the utility of models for describing the communication process and for generating research as steps in theory building.[1] This report discusses a communication model and recent research in mass media which, together, enhance our understanding of political communication. The Westley-MacLean model of communication adequately describes the nature and functions of mass media on a broad level.[2] Recent research in agenda-setting suggests a refined perspective of the model and implications for political communication research.

The Westley-MacLean model fulfills the three functions of models described by Miller: communicative, predictive, and heuristic (research-generating).[3] It is descriptive (communicative) in that it isolates relevant dimensions of the communication process. For purposes of this analysis, the important constructs are revealed in a modified version of the model.



X_1, X_2, X_3, Etc. represent "real world" phenomena or news "data." These phenomena are "covered" (observed) by a media reporter (A); and reports of the phenomena are transmitted through the gatekeeping channels of media institutions (C), such as editors. The selected phenomena are reported to the public (B). The model is predictive in that it implies that some communication processes mediate the collection of news data by a reporter: selective perception, selective retention, abstraction, etc. The model is also research-generating

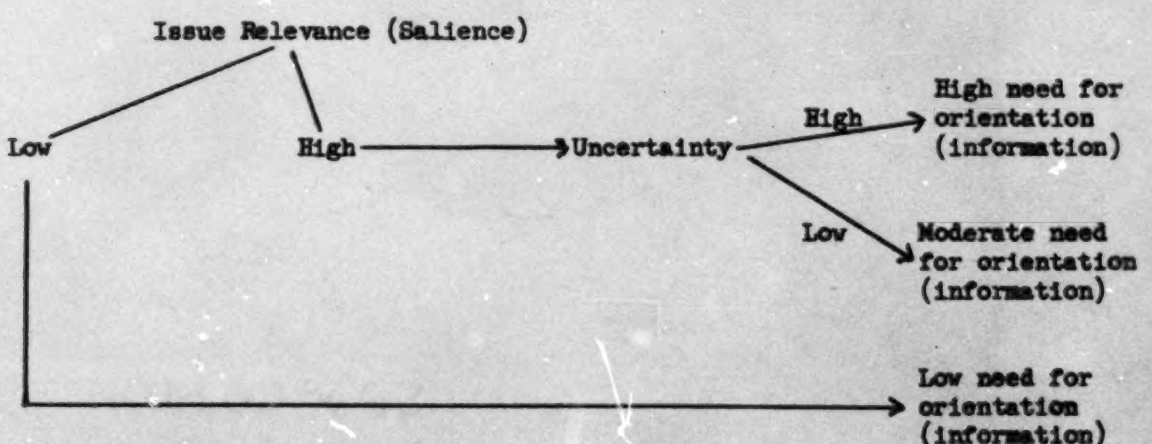
in that it calls attention to important research questions: (1) How is the public's communication behavior affected by the process of "mass-mediation"? In other words, in terms of the model, what is the function of the C$\longrightarrow$B process? (2) What factors affect selection by reporters of certain news data? What influences the X$\overset{\text{as}}{\longrightarrow}$A process? (3) What factors influence the gate-keeping processes? What affects the A$\longrightarrow$C process? Obviously, the answers to these broad questions are very complex, but a brief review of recent research suggests that the concept of agenda-setting may be usefully super-imposed on the Westley-MacLean model to reveal partial answers to some of these questions and to suggest some implications.[4]

Studies by McCombs and associates have revealed that the public's "reality" is shaped by the mass media functioning as agenda-setters. That is, the mass media structure the public's perceptions and judgments of "reality" by controlling the news which reaches the public. This view of the role played by the media has a good deal of common sense appeal, particularly in political matters, as suggested by McCombs and Shaw:

> [Receivers] learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues--that is, the media may set the "agenda" of the campaign.[5]

During the 1968 Presidential campaign, McCombs and Shaw content-analyzed news reports in selected North Carolina newspapers, national publications, and network television broadcasts. They correlated the findings with North Carolina registered voters' interview responses to a question which asked them to outline the key issues as they saw them, "regardless of what the candidates might be saying at the moment."[6] The study revealed, in part, that (1) "the media exerted a

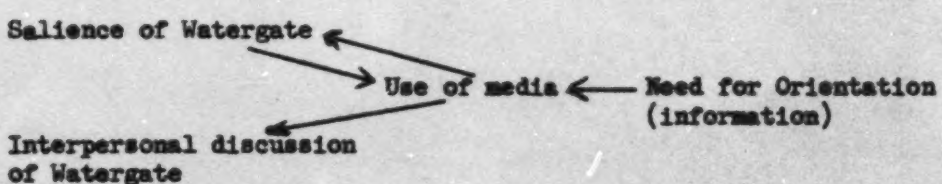
considerable impact on voters' judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign;"[7] (2) while "candidates placed widely different emphasis upon different issues, the judgments of the voters seem to reflect the composite of the mass media coverage;"[8] (3) whereas one might expect voters to selectively collect, perceive, and retain information oriented to their political predispositions, "voters who were not firmly committed early in the campaign attended well to all the news."[9] The authors convincingly rejected alternative explanations which contradict the agenda-setting hypothesis. For example, voters and media are not simply reacting to similar phenomena because few voters have alternative means of observing day-to-day Presidential campaigns. Utilizing the agenda-setting concept, in subsequent research McCombs and Weaver developed a theoretic base from which to predict patterns of information acquisition by a sample of North Carolina voters from media during the 1972 election.[10] They derived a model for receivers' behavior.



Analysis of the data tended to confirm the predicted hypotheses which were derived from the theoretic model: "high need" receivers more frequently used media for political information than "moderate need" receivers, and "moderate need" receivers more frequently used media than "low need" receivers; also, the

agenda of national political issues among "high need" receivers more closely approximated the agenda of issues provided by media than the agenda of "moderate need" receivers, and the agenda of national political issues among "moderate need" receivers more closely approximated the agenda of issues provided by media than the agenda of "low need" receivers.

The McCombs-Shaw study and the McCombs-Weaver study validated the concept of agenda-setting and provided a theoretic framework. In particular, their research revealed some consequences of agenda-setting and thus clarified the C$\longrightarrow$B process. Additional research revealed a refinement of the agenda-setting concept and explored agenda-setting outside of the campaign arena. Extensive survey evidence made it apparent that respondents regarded the Watergate affair as much more salient (relevant) to them in spring, 1974, than in fall, 1973. A newspaper content analysis for that period by Weaver and Spellman confirmed increased coverage of Watergate, and a panel of North Carolina voters was interviewed during the same period to assess agenda-setting relationships.[11] The authors found support for a revised model of receivers' behavior.



A subsequent study by Weaver and Wilhoit sought to discover predictor variables for agenda-setting in news coverage of U.S. Senators.[12] That is, the study was concerned with determinants of mass media sending behavior, the X$\longrightarrow$A process and the A$\longrightarrow$C process. A massive sample of news media, including Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and Public Affairs Information

Bulletin, news magazines and Eastern and Western "prestige" newspapers, were content-analyzed for references to Senators. The best predictors of references were "state population size, 'inner club status' (for Democrats), number of bills introduced in the Senate (for Republicans), and the size of a Senator's staff."

The $X_{\infty} \longrightarrow A$ process and the $A \longrightarrow C$ process have, of course, been the subject of a good deal of research which preceded the development of the agenda-setting concept. Nonetheless, the research findings may be usefully interpreted within the agenda-setting context, and Chaffee and Petrick recently provided an overview of some of them. For example, they reviewed some of the criteria used in assigning reporters to cover a story, including "news value," conflict, proximity, and others.[13] They also reviewed some of the influences which guide reporters during their observations, such as editors' expectations and role perception.[14] Finally, the nature of gatekeeping by editors, the $A \longrightarrow C$ process, was reviewed by Chaffee and Petrick, on the basis of a single case study of a wire editor's decisions.[15] However, other researchers have used research techniques with greater external validity to study the influences on gatekeepers. For example, Buckalew found, in part, that the key elements which influence a television news editor's judgments of a story are conflict, high impact, proximity, and timeliness.[16] There are, of course, many other reports of gatekeeping research.[17]

The research briefly reviewed herein suggests that agenda-setting is an important and useful concept. Some consequents and some determinants of agenda-setting have been revealed and additional investigations are needed. For example, most agenda-setting research to date has focused on matters which are clearly political. Other issues which are less clearly political need investigation, such as matters of the economy, consumerism, and morality. For purposes of comparison and replication, research in these areas might usefully

focus on the three stages or processes which are emphasized by the model above. Furthermore, agenda-setting studies which focus principally on the $X \xrightarrow[\infty]{} A$ process of reporting would be useful.

Although additional research within the agenda-setting construct is needed, some political implications of the concept are already apparent. Some of these are emphasized by the following incident taken from a report by the Los Angeles Times, "Politics: How TV, Press Determine What is News."[18]

> This was the news on April 4, 1974:
>
> The FBI said the SLA probably forced Patty Hearst to denounce her parents.
>
> The House Judiciary Committee gave President Nixon until Tuesday to turn over the tapes.
>
> Hank Aaron hit his 714th home run and tied Babe Ruth's record.
>
> Assembly Speaker Bob Moretti blasted Secretary of State Edmund G. Brown for putting alleged pro-Brown propaganda in a state pamphlet mailed at taxpayers' expense. [Moretti and Brown were Primary Gubernatorial candidates.]

The Times report suggested that news about Gubernatorial candidates did not receive much coverage by the media, and a content analysis of the Times and one other major-city newspaper tends to confirm the hypothesis:

Placement and Column Inches

	L.A. Times	San Diego Tribune
Hearst Story	Front page, 38 inches	Page 14, 17 inches
Nixon Story	Front page, 30 inches	Page 4, 14 inches
Aaron Story	Front page, 10 inches Sports page, 11¼ inches	Front page, 4 inches Sports page, 9¼ inches
Election Story	Page 3, 31 inches	Page 15, 16 inches

Agenda-setting research indicates that the low priority which is assigned by media to routine electoral matters will in turn affect the salience of these matters for consumers of media reports. Thus, the means by which political leaders are selected may become less important to voters than other matters.

Such a development is of no small importance because election campaigns may guide the actions of candidates after their election and thus affect the nature of the political state.[19]

The Times report offers further evidence that political news is currently emphasized less by the media than in previous years. For example, KNXT, Channel 2 in Los Angeles, previously dominated its competitors in news program ratings. When KNBC, Channel 4, gained in the ratings, KNXT's news staff was told that people were "concerned about coping with life--about such things as health, consumer problems, the weather, and prices."[20] KNXT eliminated its political editor and reportedly reduced by one-half to one-third the amount of political news coverage. Further, in a study commissioned by CBS' 60 Minutes show, the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism analyzed a half-hour period of television news by three competitive San Francisco stations. The study concluded that only one-half (49%) of the broadcast time is devoted to news. (Commercials 21%; sports 12%; weather 11%; promotions and chatter 7%.) And a follow-up study of the stations for five days at the height of the 1974 Gubernatorial Primary election found that only 21 minutes and 55 seconds were devoted by all three stations to the Democratic contest.

If political news is receiving less routine coverage than in previous years, what are the inhibitors and determinants of coverage? Political campaigners have turned to the use of "media events" or "pseudo-events" designed to gain the attention of reporters, to facilitate reporting, and to maximize the likelihood of reports being selected by gatekeepers and reaching the public.[21] Although many examples of candidates' use of media events are evident, a single case from the 1970 California Gubernatorial campaign is particularly revealing. Jess Unruh, previously a powerful Speaker in the Assembly, challenged the then-popular Republican incumbent, Ronald Reagan. The polls indicated that Unruh was at a severe disadvantage, and Democratic support was

not solid enough to produce financial backing needed to overcome the poll deficit. Thus, Unruh sought to maximize free media exposure. He kicked off his campaign with a Labor Day visit to the residence of a wealthy, well-known Reagan adviser, Henry Salvatori. Unruh began the media event by taking reporters to a middle-class residence in a Democratic neighborhood where an aide displayed a prepared flipcard on a stand. Unruh claimed that taxes on this residence would increase $82 under a current Reagan proposal. Reporters were then taken to the residence of Salvatori, an oil magnate, and Unruh asserted that the owner of this $700,000 residence would benefit from a $4113 tax relief under the Reagan plan. The scene described by the Los Angeles Times was captured by local film crews and reporters:

> There was Salvatori, fresh from the tennis court, and his wife angrily shouting through the gate at Unruh and the horde of newsmen and staff members who clogged the narrow Bel-Air street in front of the mansion. As Unruh made his brief spiel to newsmen, . . . the oilman and his wife joined the fray and, at times, three voices were echoing in rising decibels simultaneously.[22]

Later in the campaign Unruh repeated the media event tactic. For example, on one occasion he took reporters to the offices of a life insurance company in the prestigious financial district on Wilshire Boulevard, a major Los Angeles thoroughfare: "There, in shirtsleeves, Unruh . . . set up his charts on an easel and conducted a sidewalk seminar on what he considers the evils of tax exemptions granted on life insurance company home office buildings."[23]

A candidate's use of media events is only one example of an attempt to cope with media processes, but there are other more serious issues related to mass media reporting processes. One of these is the phenomena of co-opting the media. Numerous recent examples can be cited: the Arab terrorists at the

1972 Olympics; the kidnapping of Mexican President Luis Echeverria's father-in-law in September, 1974; the frequent terrorist bombing of buildings in large cities; the threat of Uganda President Idi Amin in July, 1975, to execute writer Dennis Hills and the demand that the British Foreign Secretary visit Uganda in order to halt the execution; etc. But perhaps the most sensational recent example is the SLA kidnapping of Patricia Hearst. Members of the Symbionese Liberation Army, like other terrorists, managed to symbolically create events which the media would not overlook. They kidnapped Patricia Hearst, the daughter of the owner of a large media organization; they politicized the event by sending tape recorded messages to other media organizations; and they forced massive public demonstrations of sympathy for their purported goals, a food-give-away for the poor. Such sensationalist tactics demand media coverage and, as indicated by agenda-setting research, affect the salience of the events for media consumers. In the interests of satiating receivers' interests, the media continue and increase coverage of the events, for economic motives or for purposes of public service. Thus, co-opting the media increases consumers' perceived salience of such matters which, in turn, seems to increase coverage and perpetuate co-opting tactics.

On a normative level, students of communication may deplore a de-emphasis of routine reporting of political events and an increased number of instances wherein the media are co-opted. On a research level, however, there is a need for further investigation of the determinants and inhibitors of news reporting and investigation of the functions of media. The notion of agenda-setting, as reflected in the more general model of Westley and MacLean, provides a useful conceptual framework for such investigations.

[1]For example: Ronald L. Smith, "Theories and Models of Communication Processes," in Larry L. Barker and Robert J. Kibler, ed., Speech Communication Behavior (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 16-43; C. David Mortensen, Communication the Study of Human Interaction (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), Chapter 2, "Communication Models."

[2]Bruce H. Westley and Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr., "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," Journalism Quarterly XXXIV (Winter, 1957), 31-38.

[3]Gerald R. Miller, Introduction to Speech Communication, Second Edition, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1972), pp. 56-60.

[4]There is no indication that the research reviewed here was prompted specifically by the Westley-MacLean model, but the present analysis maintains that the notions are closely compatible.

[5]Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly XXXVI (Summer, 1972), 176.

[6]McCombs and Shaw, 178.

[7]McCombs and Shaw, 180.

[8]McCombs and Shaw, 181.

[9]McCombs and Shaw, 182.

[10]Maxwell McCombs and David Weaver, "Voters' Need for Orientation and Use of Mass Communication," paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Montreal, April, 1973.

[11]David H. Weaver and Charles Spellman, "Watergate and the Media: A Case Study of Agenda-Setting," paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, New Orleans, April, 1974.

[12]David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "Agenda-Setting for the Media: Determinants of Senatorial News Coverage," paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Chicago, April, 1975.

[13]Steven H. Chaffee and Michael J. Petrick, Using the Mass Media (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), 33-35.

[14]Chaffee and Petrick, 35-36.

[15]Chaffee and Petrick, 38-39.

[16]James K. Buckalew, "A Q-Analysis of Television News Editors' Decisions," Journalism Quarterly XLVI (Spring, 1969), 136.

[17]For example: Abraham S. Bass, "Refining the 'Gatekeeper' Concept: An UN Radio Case Study," Journalism Quarterly XLVI (Spring, 1969), 69-72; James K. Buckalew, "News Elements and Selection by Television News Editors," Journalism Quarterly XIV (Winter, 1969-70), 47-54; Robert W. Clyde and James K. Buckalew, "Inter-Media Standardization: A Q-Analysis of News Editors," Journalism Quarterly XLVI (Summer, 1969), 349-351; B. H. Liebes, "Decision-Making by Telegraph Editors

AP or UPI?," Journalism Quarterly XLIII (Autumn, 1966), 434-442; Paul Snider, "Mr. Gates Revisited: 1966 Version of the 1949 Case Study," Journalism Quarterly XLIV (Autumn, 1967), 419-427; Walter J. Ward and Associates, The Nature of News in Three Dimensions (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University, 1973).

[18]Bill Boyarsky, "Politics: How TV, Press Determine What is News," Los Angeles Times, October 10, 1974, Part I, p. 1ff.

[19]V. O. Key, The Responsible Electorate (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 6.

[20]Boyarsky.

[21]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 8-12; Edward Schwartzman, Campaign Craftsmanship, A Professional Guide for Elective Office (New York: Universe Books, 1973), p. 161.

[22]Richard Bergholz, "Unruh, Salvatori Meet in Angry Confrontation," Los Angeles Times, September 8, 1970, Part I, p. 3.

[23]Carl Greenberg, "Unruh Sets up Easel to Assail Tax Exemptions," Los Angeles Times, October 10, 1970, Part I, p. 32.